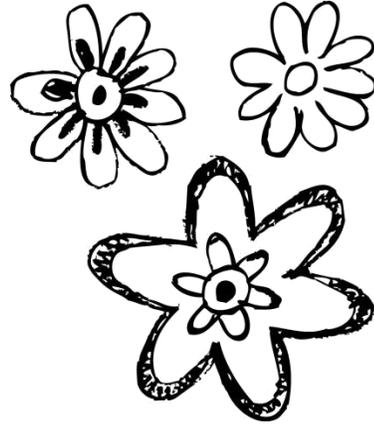


The Story of a Forest

Adapted from the USDA Forest Service Southwestern Region curriculum (for DBJ)

Supplies Needed

- Cup of water
- 15-25 straws
- Tree cookie diagram (provided)
- A great story voice!



Introduction

To begin, there is an informational video available through GSWCF on prescribed fires at our camps. This activity can be done with or without the video; however for specific information about the burns at our properties, please refer to the video:

<https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/recording/7934038910123130883>

This activity will talk about the natural role of fire in a generalized forest. For more information about Florida's forests, visit [Fresh From Florida](#).

For G.I.R.L.s wanting to learn more about fire in forestry, the USDA Forest Service has a free publication called the *Natural Inquirer*. Volume 4 Number 1 is the [Wildland Fire Edition](#), and is better suited for older GIRLs (**JCSA**). For more information or resources contact: chuntley@gswcf.org

Story/Lesson

Today, we are going to learn about fire and the role it plays in the forest. Let me ask you a question. Do you think fires are bad for the forest? Why or why not? Well, let's find out together while I tell you a story. While I tell this story, I want you to use your imagination to the fullest.

Imagine a forest full of big, healthy trees. Between the trees are areas where the sunlight falls on the forest floor. Flowers, grasses and bushes are growing in the sunshine. Deer and elk wander into these clearings, eating the nice, green leaves. How many of you have seen deer and elk foraging in the forest?

Underneath the big trees are little trees that have sprouted from seeds the big tree has dropped.

Over time, these little trees grow, sending their roots down into the soil and their branches up toward the sunlight. The forest is becoming more crowded with trees. In the clearing, some little trees have sprouted among the grasses, flowers and bushes, and these trees are growing too – their tiny branches casting shadows on the ground.

All the little trees grow bigger and bigger, taking food and water away from the bigger trees. In the clearings, the little trees are growing and making more and more shade. Underneath the trees, the grasses and flowers start to die because they need sunlight to live. Soon, the little clearing is filled in with trees. The grasses, flowers, and bushes are gone, and the deer and elk have no more green leaves to eat.

One day, lightning strikes in the forest - and a **fire** starts. The fire burns along the forest floor, burning up all the little trees and the sick, weak or old trees that are no longer strong enough to survive a fire. In the clearing where the flowers used to be, the fire removes all the little trees, and once again sunlight spills onto the forest floor.

After the fire, grasses and flowers grow once again. Where the old, sick trees used to be, sunlight bathes the forest floor allowing even more grasses and flowers to grow. Deer and elk again like to come here to nibble the nice, green leaves.

Then the big trees produce their seeds, the seeds fall to the forest floor, and little trees start to grow. Eventually, the little trees grow up, the grasses and bushes die, and it is time for another forest fire.

(Pull out the tree cookie diagram and show the children what a fire scar looks like. Make sure they understand that by counting the fire scars, they can see how often the tree survived forest fires.) These fire scars show that in the past, fires were common and perfectly natural in a forest. Did you know that some trees have nice, thick bark to help them survive fires: like our Longleaf Pine!

What would happen if the forest did not burn anymore? The forest would get too crowded. When a forest has too many trees, the trees get hungry and thirsty. *(Show children a big cup with a straw in it.)* Imagine that Smokey Bear was drinking from this cup. He would have plenty of water. Right? But, what if all the other animals in the forest – the squirrels, the rabbits, the birds, the deer – came and put their straws in the cup? *(Put all the remaining straws in.)* Would the water last very long? It is the same way with trees; if there are a lot of trees growing close together, then all the trees will be thirsty and hungry, and they won't be able to grow big and strong.

What would happen if someone left a campfire burning in a forest with lots and lots of trees? A fire could start. But, it probably wouldn't be a good fire like we talked about earlier. Good fires in the forest are ones that are hot enough to get rid of some of the little trees and the unhealthy trees but not hot enough to burn up all the bigger, healthier trees. A fire that started in a forest with lots and lots of trees would probably be a big fire. Think about it – doesn't a campfire get bigger if you add more wood to it? A forest fire is the same way; the more wood in the forest, the bigger a forest fire can get. Big fires can kill all the trees in the forest – young or old, sick or healthy. These big fires are bad fires. We call them wildfires. Fire is a natural part of the forested ecosystems of the Southwest. Without fire, the forest can become very unhealthy.

Many of our forests are crowded right now because they haven't burned in a long, long time. That means our forests are very dangerous. We have to be careful with fire like never before. If we are careless with fire now, we can start a wildfire that sweeps through the forest and kills all the trees. What are some ways that fires get started in the woods? What can you do to help make sure that fires don't start?

This is one reason Girl Scouts of West Central Florida is beginning prescribed burns at our camp properties: to reduce the potential of a catastrophic fire. We also have areas of fire-climax communities at some of our camps, so these habitats rely on fire to remain healthy!

Closing

Now, let's review some of the main things we just learned about.

1. Fires are a natural part of the forest's life cycle. When they burn through the forest on a regular basis, they remove young, sick, weak and old trees, leaving the healthy trees to grow big and strong. These fires are "good" fires.
2. If a forest hasn't burned in a long time, it will get crowded and unhealthy. A forest fire in a crowded forest can get very large and dangerous. These "bad" fires are called wildfires.
3. We have to be very careful with fire in the forest. Our forests are very, very crowded, and if we're careless, we will start a wildfire that may destroy the forest.

Tree Cookie Diagram

